



# County of San Diego

## Health and Human Services Agency

### A Mental Health Message During the Wildfire Crisis

Jeffrey Rowe, MD, Childrens Mental Health Services

John H. Shale, MD, Adult Mental Health Services

October 31, 2003

San Diego County has experienced a terrible tragedy the past several days and the crisis is still ongoing for some of its residents. The County's focus of concern has been on the people who have had to evacuate their homes and neighborhoods. All of us- adults, children, and emergency workers- have also been affected. We all are experiencing some degree of tension, anxiety, and worry. Regular life is on hold, usual activities have been set aside. Thankfully, many families and friends are together and supporting each other. During this time, kids will need special attention, but so will many adult family members.

#### ADVICE:

1. Schedule the day. Too much unstructured time during a crisis can be unsettling and cause increased stress and anxiety.
2. Limit television news watching to brief periods. The dramatic images are compelling, arousing, and stress producing. They don't add much new information, but convey a graphic and intense message of danger and impending doom.
3. Vary activities during the day. Play board games, read books, play video games, watch entertaining TV, do light exercise (in doors).
4. It is a good idea to talk with kids, and each other, about the fire. Begin with a brief discussion of the facts and the sad and scary results. Spend a longer time on the many efforts underway to put out the fires and help the people who have been displaced.
  - a. Red Cross Shelters, other shelters, animal shelters
  - b. Police, fire fighters
  - c. Doctors, nurses
  - d. Mental health staff
  - e. SDGE workers
  - f. Numerous volunteers
  - g. Crisis teams at the shelters

5. Kids take their cues from the adults around them, and so do other adults. Be calm, establish and activate your plan
  - a. Ensure safety
  - b. Provide shelter and clothing for your family
  - c. Pack up irreplaceable belongings (important documents, photographs)
  - d. Feed your family (avoid becoming cold, tired, hungry, or lonely- these increase stress)
  - e. Give love and support; ask for it, too.
  - f. Stay inside, limit exercise until the air quality improves.
6. As the crisis subsides...
  - a. Talk about how you and your family can help others
  - b. Collect toys, extra clothes, books, and blankets for the people who have lost their belongings.
7. For kids and families experiencing intolerable stress...
  - a. Go to the local shelter. These shelters will provide safety and an opportunity to share experiences with others. The American Red Cross shelters have counseling teams available.
  - b. Call the Access & Crisis Line 1 (800) 479-3339 for mental health assistance.